

Real Stories of Young Entrepreneurs in Wisconsin

Name: Alex Costello

School & Grade: 10th grade at Campbellsport High School

Business Name: Al's Chicks and Farm Fresh Eggs

What inspired you to start your business? Tell us about your inspiration, your idea and how it became a reality.

After spending the summer between my 7th and 8th grade year working for someone else, I decided that I would rather be my own boss. I saved the money that I earned and invested it in my own business.

When I was not at work, I was investing my time, sweat, energy, and money to remodel an old milk house on our farm and convert it into chicken coop. I felt confident that I could sell eggs to local families who were looking for locally produced fresh farm eggs. Little did I know how successful this could become! I had already been raising turkeys for three summers, so felt comfortable that I could make the move into the laying hens business.

On September 22, 2011 I bought 30 Rhode Island Red laying hens, and got my first egg on September 27th. By the end of 2011 I had sold more than 100 dozen eggs. My business has grown dramatically in 2012! I currently have 102 laying hens, raised and sold 50 turkeys and 200 meat birds. The increase in laying hens was based on an increased customer base.

The addition of more turkeys and the meat birds required the addition of more housing and pens. This investment has been a positive move for my business. Plans for 2013 include doubling the number of meat birds to raise and sell.

Describe your product / service, purpose / goals, features / benefits, unique selling point.

My business name is Al's Chicks' and Farm Fresh Eggs. I have 102 laying hens that I raise year round. I have three breeds of chickens which include 53 Rhode Island Reds, 45 White Leghorns, and 4 Americana Easter Egg layers. This combination of birds allows me to meet the needs of my customers. I see white, brown, and greenish-blue eggs. Most customers purchase a combination of white and brown eggs, however, some customers choose all white, all brown and one customer prefers the all blue-green eggs!

These locally grown and fresh eggs are delivered on a daily basis. It is not uncommon for me to deliver 10-20 dozen eggs before school! I raise all of my meat birds from March through October. This past year I raised 200 Cornish Rock Broilers which are your meat chickens. I raised three batches of birds in groups of 50, 75, and 75. These birds finished at a dressed weight that ranged from 7 0- 13 pounds in just 8 weeks. I also raised 50 turkeys with a combination of Bronze and Broad Breasted White turkeys. These birds finished at a dressed weight of 17 – 35 pounds in a matter of 4 ½ months.

My purpose is to provide my customers with locally grown and fresh product. This is a need in my community, which is evident by my growing customer base. My reputation of providing excellent customer service coupled with producing quality products has allowed my business to continue to grow!

A key to my sales is product branding. The Al's Chicks' and Farm Fresh Eggs logo is present on every product that I sell. The logo is present on my egg cartons, business Facebook page, on clothing orders, parade float and business cards. I also donate products to local fundraisers. I am a frequent donor to local fundraisers and even created a business float for the Eden parade. I exhibited my birds on the float, secured two chicken costumes that my friends wore, a chicken costume that my puppy wore, gave away business cards to adults lining the parade route (random cards had a notation on the back indicating that they won a free dozen eggs) and 1000 freeze pops to the children in attendance. My float won the business division of the parade and I gained numerous new customers based on the appearance.

When I exhibit my birds at our county fair, I include a laminated sign on each of the pens that have my business name, logo and contact information on them. In addition to selling my eggs, I was also able to make contact with an exhibitor from another country who was interested in purchasing birds from me for exhibition at another county fair!

And added benefit to my turkey and meat bird customers is that I personally process all of my birds at S & D Custom Cutting. I originally visited S & D when I was looking for a processing facility for my birds. During the visit I was offered a part-time position at the business. This experience has provided me with additional knowledge of the industry, the opportunity to make money to invest in my business and most importantly has allowed me to provide additional attention to detail in EVERY phase of my products. This is an added benefit to my customers!

A couple of my goals for 2013 is to raise and process five batches of 85 roaster chickens, maintain raising 50 turkeys, continue to provide a constant quality produce to my customers, and sell 2,000 dozen eggs by June 25th, 2013. I have started talks with a local restaurant to provide them with my eggs and was just contacted by a local produce business who is interested in carrying my products. These are opportunities that I could not have imagined just a little over a year ago. With these business opportunities I will need to determine how much of an expansion I am willing to do without sacrificing quality products or customer service.

Due to the amount of feed that I order, I have also had the opportunity to become a feed representative for Big Gains feed of Lodi. I plan to reach out to other local producers and increase my sales of feed during this upcoming year as well.

Tell us about yourself and how you make your business succeed.

The reason that my business has grown and continues to be successful is based on the fact that I take a great deal of pride in producing quality products. I am willing to work hard every day to make my business successful. I have live animals and a perishable product. I cannot skip a day of work because I don't feel like working or am ill. I am responsible for hiring people to take my place if I cannot work.

There are days when owning a business like this can be a challenge! As a high school student and varsity two sport athlete, there are times when it is very late when I get home from practice or matches. Homework and my business must still be completed each day! Late nights paired with early morning deliveries can be challenging, but the paybacks are priceless. Every time I get a new customer or compliments about my products, I am motivated to be even better! Determination and hard work are keys to me making the business be successful.

Last summer was a challenge for anyone in the agriculture industry. Lack of rain resulted in higher feed costs. I made the mistake of buying my feed at four different times during the summer. This decision proved costly when the price of my feed skyrocketed as the summer wore on. I had to raise the price of my meat birds. I was concerned that the increased price would turn some people away from buying my birds. However, I was wrong. My customers were willing to pay the additional price due to the quality of my birds. After watching the market reports for this year and talking with local producers I have made the decision to order all of my feed for the

summer in March. By ordering early, purchasing a large volume of feed and using my dealer discount I am planning to keep my feed costs as low as I can.

Customers also enjoy the opportunity to be able to visit me at my farm and see that I am raising my birds in a clean and safe environment. I have one customer that will stop over a couple times during the summer to see the birds and collect her own eggs from the birds! She loves being able to be “connected” with the food she eats! Giving tours of my business is something that I enjoy being able to do!

Some of my proudest achievements over the past year included selling my 1,000th dozen eggs, becoming a feed dealer with Big Gains Feeds LLC., exhibiting the Grand Champion Turkey, Champion cockerel, and Reserve Grand Champion Meat Bird at the Fond du Lac County Fair, selling over 200 Al's Chicks and Farm Fresh Eggs t-shirts and sweatshirts, sinning 1st place in the Eden Parade for business floats and smiling on Thanksgiving morning as customers started posting pictures on Facebook of the turkeys that they purchased from me. These pictures were followed later in the day with rave reviews about how good their turkeys tasted and that they recommended getting an Al's chicks and Farm Fresh turkey for next year!

What are your future goals and vision for your business? How do you propose to develop your business?

My vision for Al's Chicks and Farm Fresh Eggs continue to grow and change as the demand for my products continue to grow. A year ago I was content to raise 25 hens and sell the eggs that they produced. I am now raising 102 hens, 50 turkeys and will produce nearly 500 roaster chickens. While selling more product is great, I need to be sure that I can continue to balance producing a quality product and providing excellent customer service to my customers. For me, those factors are key!

If I contract with a local restaurant and/or the produce business I will have expanded my business to the maximum that I can physically manage in my current facilities. To expand further would require me to hire someone at another location to raise the products that I carry. I have an individual that I would consider hiring to meet those expansion needs if I decide to move in that direction. This decision will take a great deal of thought and financial analysis to determine if this is the right direction for Al's Chicks and Farm Fresh Eggs.